

Spring and all its flowers, now joyously break their vow of silence.

It is time for celebration, not for lying low;

You too — weed out those roots of sadness from your heart.

Hafez

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NOROUZ THE ADVENT OF SPRING

Compiled by Hamideh Hosseini

Iranian community is getting ready to celebrate one of its most important holidays, Norouz, the Persian New Year.

In a 2010 resolution, the UN General Assembly designated the International Day of Norouz to fall on March 21 each year. More precisely, however, Norouz marks the day of the vernal equinox in the northern hemisphere, which can occur anytime between March 19-22, depending on the year as well as one's location. Such technicalities aside, Norouz is essentially a celebration to usher in the season of spring — a welcome respite from the preceding months of winter. Not surprisingly then, the term 'Norouz' means 'New Day' in Persian.

Over the last millennium, Norouz has developed and expanded, incorporating new social, religious and cultural influences as it spread along the Silk Road. Its date, originally calculated according to ancient astronomical practices, was revised and recalculated on numerous occasions in the 11th and 12th centuries as Norouz continued to be a celebration of great social significance under various rulers and governments.

Renowned Muslim scholars, such as the Persian Abu Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni, known as Biruni (973-1048), Mahmud ibn Hussayn ibn Muhammad al-Kashgari (1005-1102), and Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) are among the many intellectuals who studied the date of Norouz.

History

According to UNESCO, Norouz is a rite dating back to at least the 6th century BCE, marking the new year and ushering in the spring.

Norouz is celebrated by peoples of many regions and cultures across this vast region. Some of the festival's earliest origins lie in Zoroastrianism, marking one of the holiest days in the ancient Zoroastrian calendar. The return of the spring was seen to have great

spiritual significance, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil and joy over sorrow. In particular, the 'Spirit of Noon', known as 'Raphithwina', who was considered to be driven underground by the 'Spirit of Winter' during the cold months, was welcomed back with celebrations at noon on the day of Norouz according to Zoroastrian tradition.

Norouz is also associated with a great variety of local traditions, including the legend of Jamshid, a king in Persian mythology. To this day in Iran, Norouz celebrations are sometimes referred to as *Nowrūz-e Jamshidi*. According to the myth, Jamshid was carried through the air in a chariot, a feat that so amazed his subjects that they established a festival on that day. Similar mythological narratives exist in Indian and Turkish traditions, while the legend of *Amoo Nowrouz* is popular in the countries of Central Asia.

Norouz observed in other countries

Norouz, the vernal spring equinox has been celebrated by people of Iran and Mesopotamia since antiquity. Although continuously celebrated in Iran for at least 3,000 years, many countries along the Silk Roads including Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, China, the Caucasus and Egypt also celebrate this event.

Norouz registration on UNESCO

In recognition of the importance of this ancient rite, Norouz was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009.

Norouz, was inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List on November 30, 2016.

UNESCO has registered the Norouz celebrations as shared practices of 12 countries. Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan were listed by the UN agency in 2009 as countries where Norouz is

celebrated.

A new proposal was prepared last year to include five more countries namely Afghanistan, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Traditions in other countries

Although the traditions and customs that accompany the celebration of Norouz vary from country to country, there are many unifying features. In most regions, symbolic preparations fire and water take place before the festival. In Iran, these ceremonies take place on the eve of last Wednesday before Norouz, known as *Chaharshanbe Suri*, while in Azerbaijan, this practice is carried out over the four Wednesdays preceding the celebrations. In many places, households fill up their



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vegetables combined with many local ingredients. In Kyrgyzstan, this meal is a public ceremony, with designated areas set aside in towns for the preparation of *Norouz Kadje* or *Chon Kadje* — a type of soup made from bull's meat.

Norouz is also the occasion for traditional cultural activities, combining common practices with local customs. Poetry is a popular feature of Norouz celebrations, with 'Norouz poems' being written, published and recited

on horseback), and *Jamby Atau* (shooting from horseback).

Other Norouz traditions include local street performances, light rope walking, called *Band Bāz*, in Iran, and the sport of *Buz Kashi*, in which horse-riders compete for an object representing the head of a calf, in Afghanistan.

Haft seen

Central to the Iranian celebrations of Norouz is the setting of the *Haft seen* table. In line with the literal meaning of its name — 'haft' refers to the number seven, while 'seen' refers to the letter 'S' in Persian language. Thus the 'haft seen' table contains seven items, all with Persian names starting with 'S'.

Haft seen has a rather complex history, having evolved from Haft-Shin of the Kayanids dynasty era to Haft-Chin of the Achaemenids dynasty circa and to its current Haft Seen since the writing of 'Shahnameh' ('Book of the Kings') — the epic poem book of the Persian kings by Ferdowsi of nearly 1,000 years ago.

In fact, the word *Haft*, meaning seven, denoting the seven days of 'creations' has remained the same throughout.

In addition, each of them have their own symbolism, as outlined by a teaching resource on Norouz published by Harvard University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies:

1. *Suman* (crushed spice of berries): For the sunrise and the spice of life;
2. *Senjed* (sweet dry fruit of the lotus tree): For love and affection
3. *Serkeh* (vinegar): For patience and age
4. *Seeb* (apples): For health and beauty
5. *Seer* (garlic): For good health
6. *Samanu* (wheat pudding): For fertility and the sweetness of life
7. *Sabzeh* (sprouted wheat grass): For rebirth and renewal of nature

Apart from these seven items, there are also many other items that Iranians include in their *Haft seen* table, such as painted eggs representing fertility and a mirror to signify reflection on the past year. While the origins of the *Haft seen* table are still not well-documented today, the tradition of placing various symbolic items on a Sofa (a piece of cloth spread on the floor or table) during Norouz has its roots in Zoroastrianism — a Persian monotheistic religion that predated the Abrahamic faiths.

The other principal customs associated with Norouz, i.e. *Chaharshanbe Suri* (fire-jumping festival) and *Sizdah Bedar* (the tradition of spending the day outdoors on the thirteenth day of Nowruz), probably had historical links to Zoroastrianism too.



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supplies of water on the eve of last Wednesday of the year, and in Kyrgyzstan, all vessels in the house are to be filled on Norouz Eve, in the hope that this will bring abundance in the new year and keep away misfortune.

It is also customary across most regions to visit cemeteries before the Norouz celebrations begin, with visitors bringing candles and offerings to remember the dead. Two candles are commonly placed at the door to the house on Norouz Eve in Kazakhstan. In Azerbaijan, the dead are commemorated on the second day of Norouz, known as the 'Day of Fathers'.

On the day of Norouz, there is much feasting, visiting family members and friends, and exchanging gifts. A wide range of cultural performances and traditions also take place. Children are often given small toys, and traditionally play with colorfully painted eggs. Families and within communities share a symbolic meal, often of cooked rice and

around the time of the festival. Music is also very important, and many of the countries that celebrate Norouz have their own traditional folk songs specifically for the festival.

One example is the well-known Afghan song 'Molla Mammad Jaan', which is said to have originated in the city of Mazar-i Sharif but is also sung in Iran and Tajikistan. In Uzbekistan, Norouz songs are performed by traditional singers and story tellers, such as the *baxshi*, *shoirs* and *dostonchi*. Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, competitions take place between *Akayns*, epic story tellers or bards who improvise tales about Norouz.

Open air festivities such as the game of *Kopkari*, wrestling and horse racing often take place to celebrate Norouz in Uzbekistan, and similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, traditional horsemanship is displayed as part of the festivities, with communities coming together to enjoy horse racing. *Ky: Kumay* (a race in which men chase women on horseback), *Enish* (wrestling



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Weather



29 14

Ahvaz



14 2

Borujerd



13 8

Rasht



20 8

Semnan



16 2

Arak

18
v 7

Tehran



9 -1

Bishkek



11 4

Istanbul



14 6

Amman



7 -3

Minsk



7 -2

Moscow